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SUBJECT: Uruguay: A Race to the Runoff

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State, EXEC; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

Summary

¶1. (U) Uruguay's presidential runoff campaign is in full swing. Although both contenders are struggling to build on the October 25 elections, polls give ruling Frente Amplio (FA) coalition candidate Jose Mujica a significant lead (48 percent to 40 percent) for the November 29 run-off. As the October elections also allowed the FA to regain a slim majority in parliament, National (Blanco) Part candidate Luis Alberto Lacalle has a steep slope to climb toward the presidency. Lacalle is ready to fight with renewed vigor, and he is presenting himself as the candidate best able to govern with the whole country's interests in mind. End summary.

Immediate Reactions

¶2. (U) Having secured just under 49 percent of the valid vote, Mujica and his Frente Amplio coalition made an aggressive start to the second round by declaring the elections to be basically over. They asserted that the retention of the parliamentary majority makes the Mujica-Astori ticket the only viable political force and that Lacalle would be hamstrung were he to win the presidency. Furthermore, the Frente, contrasting their near absolute majority to Lacalle's 30 percent share, has complained about the need to go to a runoff at all. FA reps have pointed out that several other Latin American countries, a candidate can win with only 40% of the vote, or even 35% in Nicaragua. The Blancos meanwhile, initially jubilant to have forced the FA into a second round, quickly sobered once the Electoral court displayed the final results and it became clear that Lacalle's campaign would be left fighting an uphill battle to gain a presidency whose opposition would have the upper hand in both houses.

All over, bar the shouting?

¶3. (U) Polls now show Mujica with 48 percent and Lacalle with 40 percent. Lacalle's chances of salvaging his presidential bid are low, but he remains in the running. As expected, his efforts have been boosted by the support of Colorado leader Pedro Bordaberry, who managed to secure a substantial 16.9 percent of the vote on October 25 and announced that he would be voting for Lacalle in the second round in his election night celebration speech. Although

Bordaberry (who is seeking to preserve as much political independence as possible) has said he will not be directly campaigning for Lacalle, the Colorado Party executive committee nevertheless "recommended" that Colorado voters support the Blanco candidate and will be carrying that message as part of a national tour to thank voters for their support in the first round. Lacalle can also probably count on receiving a proportion of the 2.5 percent of votes that went to the Independent Party. But, his chances hinge on his being able to claw back votes that already went to Mujica in the first round. The Blancos calculate the die hard-hard FA vote (qualified by one party strategist as those who would vote for the FA whomever the candidate) as about 44 percent. This leaves around 4 percent that the Blancos believe could be persuaded to change allegiance in the second round.

Blanco Strategies

14. (U) The first round took a visible toll on Lacalle, not least because of a lingering and painful leg injury (reftel). Recent days, however, have shown a refreshed candidate. He is a man accustomed to political knocks, and had to fight his way out of the political wilderness to become the National Party candidate, and so can be expected to display tenacity in this home stretch. His first move has been to appoint a new campaign manager, the senator Gustavo Penades, thereby replacing the ad-hoc combination of his private secretary and his wife who oversaw the first round. He is also reportedly receiving advice from Ramiro Agulla, a high profile political marketing expert from Argentina.

15. (U) A key note Lacalle's run-off campaign will be turning the FA parliamentary majority from a negative factor into a motivational rallying call. A significant proportion of the electorate fear that a Mujica presidency combined with a parliamentary majority could result in a sharp turn to the left: especially given the dominance of Mujica's MPP faction with the FA itself (it accounts for 37 percent of the FA's presence in the Senate and 50 percent of its share in the house). Keenly aware of this concern, Lacalle is repositioning his proposed presidency as a moderate influence. While a Blanco presidency facing an FA majority sounds like a recipe for political deadlock, Lacalle insists his government will be based on negotiation and has already proposed the campaign slogan: "The balance is in your hands." And in fact, Lacalle emphasizes in his speeches that the dominance of one party, in both the executive and legislative branches, is highly unusual in the Uruguayan context.

16. (U) To maximize the effectiveness of this approach, Blanco party figures are focusing on Mujica's biggest drawbacks - his relatively weak command of economic and foreign policy (pronouncing as hypocritical his stated intent to have Astori handle economic policy) and the unpredictability and variability of his policy pronouncements (pointing to the Frente Amplio's own discomfort with Mujica's impromptu comments). Opposition figures are pounding on their disbelief that Mujica can be a continuation of Vazquez, and the more conservative press (most notably daily El Pais) continues to run editorials urging Uruguayans to come to their senses as they get ready to vote for the man who will fill the highest office in the land. With Mujica's perceived shortcomings accordingly highlighted, Lacalle is presenting himself as the only candidate with the capacity to govern. To emphasize the message, Lacalle absented himself from a recent Blanco tour of the interior, calculating that his non-appearance would symbolically mark his aspiration to be president of "all Uruguayans."

The Frente Amplio Seeks to Preserve their Advantage

¶7. (U) Immediately after the first round, the FA began efforts to ensure that the generally left-leaning voters in Argentina will return again for the runoff; the GOA once again has declared a holiday, and the Buquebus ferry/bus line is offering cheap fares, with the FA offering to pay the remainder for those who need it. Mujica continued to emphasize his move to the center on economic policies and intention to continue the successful policies of the Vazquez government. The leftist press are playing up the small number of Colorado party figures who have said they will not support Lacalle.

¶8. With Mujica in such an apparently strong position, many in the FA wish to simply freeze the campaign, avoid direct attacks on Lacalle and preserve their advantage. Mujica, however, has been vocal in his insistence in emphasizing the differences between himself and Lacalle, and he has broken party ranks by launching a tirade of personal insults in Lacalle's direction. Amongst other declarations, Mujica stated that the National Party harbors secret coup plotters; that a Lacalle presidency would be return to days of economic collapse and authoritative government; and he compared Lacalle to the Spanish dictator Franco. Lacalle, in contrast, has so far limited himself to a vague allusion to Mujica's "undemocratic" guerilla past. Whether this relative restraint will hold remains to be seen.

Each and Every One

¶9. (U) Every vote will be crucial. Predictably, key members of the team (including running mate Larranaga and new ally Bordaberry) swung north immediately after the elections to capitalize on the election results in the Interior - where the combined Blanco-Colorado vote exceeded Mujica's count in every department in the country with the exception of populous Montevideo and

neighboring Canelones. Lacalle himself went to Buenos Aires to try to shore up support among the expatriates there as well. Behind the Frente Amplio's indignity about having to participate in a run-off at all lies a small fear that it will be difficult to get the turnout needed from the poor, remote residents, and those who live abroad. Note: Even with mandatory voting, turnout in the first round was 90%. End note. Interest in maintaining turnout was also likely behind the decision of the umbrella labor organization PIT-CNT to work explicitly for Mujica in the second round of voting. Discussion was intense however, and significant sectors (notably the Montevideo Department public sector union) decided to stay out of the campaigning in order to maintain the traditional independence from political parties.

A Political Gift for the Blancos?

¶10. (U) Mujica has not been as vulnerable as the Blanco party had hoped to charges that the Frente government has failed in critical areas of security and education. The security issue came to the fore on November 1, however, when a recluse named Saul Feldman was discovered to have a huge cache of weapons and ammunition in a Montevideo neighborhood. He died in a subsequent raid on his nearby home in a beach town, possibly by his own hand, but only after killing a policeman. Uruguayans have been transfixed by the news of the event, including some failures by the Ministry of Interior - a raid perceived to be botched, the discovery of Uruguayan military weapons at the site, and the existence of state identification documents issued under various names. Many began to voice doubts that this was really an arms trafficking operation (traffickers are believed to move military weapons quickly, and would not store ammunition), and both ex-President Battlle and Lacalle have raised

the ante by individually suggesting that Feldman's cache was destined for "political" purposes. Ex- Tupamaro Mujica has angrily dismissed the inference as a crude attempt to damage his campaign, and Lacalle's words on the Feldman have been cited as the cause of the FA having swiftly backed out of a planned television debate.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) Lacalle continues to struggle to gain and keep the initiative. As the success of Lacalle's presidential bid involves convincing people who voted for one candidate in October to vote for his main rival mere weeks later, there is little doubt about the degree of difficulty involved. The decision to play off the concern that many feel towards the notion of Mujica having command of both parliament and the executive office makes strategic sense. Mujica is, in fact, unpredictable and inexperienced in governing, and the Frente Amplio has become accustomed to governing without consultation with the opposition on important topics. However, convincing enough voters to make a difference will be a challenge.
End Comment.
MATTHEWMAN